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Gretchen Schafft

Displaying Discrediting History in Public Sites

Perpetrators and their descendants often do not want public commemorations to be built that remind people of the horrors that relate to their personal or family histories. Even victims may be ambivalent about the value of displaying their pasts, believing that they are either too painful or impossible to adequately envision in a less terror-filled time. However, such displays often are built because enough people, or strong enough lobbies, encourage citizens to face the past and learn from it. In general, however, displays reflecting discrediting histories are scarce and often inaccurate in their representations of the past. There is a kind of civic denial that assists people in avoiding discomforting and disturbing histories by avoiding straightforward, public displays of times in which terrible events occurred.

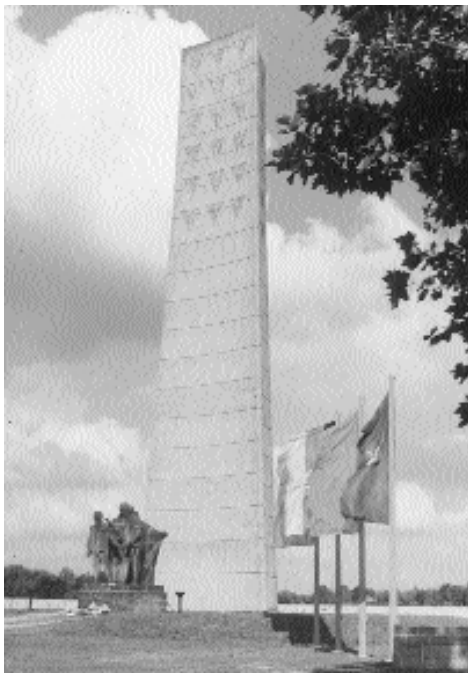
My experience as a cultural anthropologist has been primarily with concentration camp memorials in Germany and central Europe. These memorials have been erected on the historical sites where during World War II, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were incarcerated, used as a source of slave labor or for medical experimentation, or merely held until they were exterminated. It is estimated that Germany alone had more than 1,300 concentration camps during the period 1933-1945.

At the end of the war, Germany was divided into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The FRG was restructured based on a western democratic model and the GDR was restructured upon a communist model, developed and closely sanctioned by the U.S.S.R. Memorials built to com-

memorate concentration camps followed two very different patterns. In the FRG, most concentration camps were emptied, cleaned, sometimes burned to the ground, and abandoned. A few were used to house war criminals awaiting trial, but then were emptied. Only after some time elapsed did surviving inmates of a few of the camps urge that their sites be commemorated. These select localities, with the help of survivor groups, raised money to develop museums and commemorative markers, rebuild some representative buildings, and develop programs that would teach the population about the history of these disreputable places.

In the GDR, the Soviet influence played a major role. Many in the government were German political survivors of the camps and also wanted a commemoration to their own history. A specific law regulated the displays at the commemorative sites. The primary focus of the commemorative sites was to be the Soviet losses and the role of the Red Army in liberating the camps. German heroism in bringing the downfall of fascism was another theme. The displays implicated "militaristic capitalism" as the perpetrator, not the German people or even the Nazi Party. The large number of commemorative sites were heavily supported by the government whose functionaries considered them to be key to citizen political education.

Following re-unification of Germany in 1989, these two approaches to the concentration camp memorials had to be meshed. The country as a whole took over some responsibility for the maintenance of the grounds, and the displays were left to commissions appointed in each state. The memorials are located on valuable land and are often the focus of controversy as vested interests fight to gain control of all or some of the grounds for commercial purposes. As survivors' numbers decrease, resistance to this encroachment will significantly lessen.



Sachsenhausen monument designed in the Communist era and still standing. A symbolic chimney meant to show the thousands of deaths that occurred in this camp.

An additional problem existed in several of the memorial sites in the former GDR. From 1945-1950, several Nazi concentration camps were converted into prisoner of war camps to house suspected Nazi perpetrators and others who posed a threat to the newly formed Communist state. These converted facilities were referred to as "Special Camps." Prisoners in the Special Camps were held under very inhumane conditions, and thousands died in unmarked graves. Because no trials were held by the Soviet captors, it was unclear in the early 1990s, and remains unclear today, how many prisoners in the Special Camps had been Nazi guards or functionaries and how many had simply been, or were suspected of being, anti-Communists. In the beginning years of German re-unification, these two survivor groups fought for recognition in the same geographic space. At two memorials, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, the problem was eventually solved by erecting separate buildings with separate entrances for memorial for the Special Camps.

It is not only Germany, however, that has had to deal with discrediting history. One can make the case that the United States has its own share of controversial history that has been a challenge to display. This history centers on the treatment of those who do not trace their ancestry to a European background, beginning with Native Americans, continuing through the enslavement of African Americans, as well as the incarceration of Asian Americans during World War II. Civic denial of discrediting history is as strong in our country as elsewhere.

If we believe that we should not shy away from difficult historical periods, but display them with as much accuracy as possible, we must address a series of difficult questions. What lobby will exist to urge the creation of public history to commemorate victims of grave injustice or worse? In some cases the descendants of victims no longer make up a significant population group. Who will want to view history on display that implicates themselves as part of the population identified as perpetrators? How can those interested in the history gain the acceptance of others who may feel this guilt by association? These are questions that are relevant to the United States and many other countries, not only Germany.

Anthropological training and perspectives are useful in resolving some of these issues. We understand that historical presentations must

Survivors at Buchenwald in front of statuary representing the victims of the camp. This monument was built in the Communist era, but remains to this day.

mesh with the perceived realities of living communities. Anthropology has been called "the uncomfortable science" because we look beneath the surface of public presentations of self and community to understand such cultural dynamics. Thus, using my observations from several different countries and traditions in public history, I have come to the conclusion that there are some guidelines to follow in making discrediting history a part of public displays.

Those interested in the history must make the case that there is value in remembering. This can be done through the following means:

- Emphasize the **process** by which terror was established, not only the persons who perpetrated the deeds.
- Emphasize how times have changed and new institutions have been established that would not allow the past to be repeated.
- Emphasize the heroism of individuals within many groups, including the groups representing perpetrators, who took personal risks to "do the right thing."

Encourage large numbers of citizens to find meaning in the memorials themselves.

- Programs sponsored by the memorials should include a variety of themes that resonate with many in the community.
- Large numbers of school children and others should be asked to perform in musical events, readings, study groups, and other activities at the memorial sites, so that they become accustomed to the locale. Their parents and grandparents, who may be closer to the discrediting historical time, thus experience being "guests" at the site.
- Advisory committees should include a wide diversity of citizens in various roles, so that more people in the community assume a stake in the memorial.

The memorials must allow both victims and perpetrators to grieve for their losses.

- Victims often need a place to mark as a burial spot for lost colleagues, and families need a place to lay wreathes and say prayers.
- Perpetrators need a place to reconsider their pasts, their shame and their guilt, and to feel that they, or at least their families, have a possibility for rehabilitation and re-integration into a better and more just society.

It is important for all of us to find the courage to face the past. Public commemorative sites help us to do that when they are thoughtfully constructed. I believe that community mental health can actually be enhanced when people who represent all sides of highly charged historical controversies are given something to enlighten, enrich, and support their common struggle for meaning and valid memory.

Note

E. Schafft, "Civic Denial and the Memory of War," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 26:2 (1998): 255-272.
I first used the term "civic denial" in 1996 in a paper presented to the Society for Applied Anthropology. I have found it to be useful in describing the inability or unwillingness to publicly acknowledge discrediting history in a wide range of localities in various countries. It is, perhaps, not unlike an individual's inability to face disquieting and disturbing truths. In both cases, carried to extreme, denial can be a detriment to mental health.

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Raymond Firth in his address to the 41st annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Edinburgh, Scotland, called anthropology "the uncomfortable science" because it presented out-of-awareness information on cultures and peoples that they did not know or articulate about themselves.

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Photos by the author.